Ralph Wehlitz (White sportcoat)

Jeremy Ratliff
Editor, merrillfotonews.com...wrote the following article in 2020.

With age, interest in hobbies can fade and even disappear altogether. [Ralph turned 100 years old on Thursday June 6th,
2024--John Coy, MMR #730] But then again, with the help of genuine passion, most anything can stand the test of time. That is precisely the case with former teacher and model railroading enthusiast Ralph Wehlitz of Merrill.

Wehlitz will soon turn 96 [2020 June], but his age is of no consequence when it comes to model railroads; a hobby he has enjoyed since childhood. **“**I don’t remember a time when I haven’t enjoyed working with trains,” Ralph adds with a smile.

As Wehlitz explains, his interest in model railroading stems from his very first train set as a young boy.
“It all began with my first train set. I’m not sure how old I was, but I was still pretty young yet. I was fascinated by them and that just never really went away.”
A native of Milwaukee, Ralph is a WWII veteran, having served in the US Army as an infantryman in the European Theatre. Following his military service, Ralph attended UW-Madison where he graduated in

1949 with a Bachelor's Degree in Secondary Education. His first teaching job was in Mellen, Wis. -a small village in Ashland County- where he taught high school for three years in a school house, housing all students K-12.

It was during that period in Ralph's life, where he made frequent trips to explore neighboring Bayfield County. Those experiences would play a key role with his love for model railroading, later in life.

Then in 1954, Ralph relocated to Merrill, after accepting a position as an english teacher at Merrill Senior High School (which was then located at the current Prairie River Middle School building on Polk street.)

Nine years later, Ralph began a project in the basement of his home, which remains a work in progress 56 years later; a model railroad town spanning 550 square feet.

"When building and maintaining a model railroad, it helps to have a theme to guide you and help you stay on track. A theme and a name," he explains.

In Wehlitz's case, his model consists of the fictional railroad town of "Coda, Wisconsin" in the year 1938. The main rail line which runs through the heart of, and maintains a terminal in tiny Coda, is the Penokee Grandview & Winnipeg Railroad Company. The model is designed and laid out to replicate a typical rural Bayfield county rail town in that era.

Although Ralph has been retired from teaching since 1986, he remains active in sharing his knowledge in the classroom.
In fact, he continues to visit local classrooms, sharing his knowledge of not only railroading in Wisconsin, but periods of American history as well.

From presentations on colonial life in Williamsburg, Virginia to the history of the telegraph system, Ralph also hosts local elementary school students at his home; showcasing his model railroad with help of lifelong friend and fellow model raildroad enthusiast Tom Burg.

“Working with kids isn’t strange to me. The kids have always responded very well to my presentations. I enjoy sharing my interest with them, and if they happen to develop an interest of their own, even better!” Ralph adds.

While Ralph Wehlitz’s passion for railroading remains strong as ever, he readily admits the several hours a day he enjoys spending on his craft, wouldn’t be possible without the help of the staff of Kindhearted Homecare of Merrill.

“Due to macular degeneration, I am not able to see as well I used to,” he explains. “But the gals at Kindhearted have been very helpful. They have the eyes to find things I can’t,” he jokes with a laugh.

“Without them, I don’t think I would still be able to work on my railroad. Their help means a lot to me.”

[Ralph may possibly be the oldest and only thus far to reach over 100 years of age as a Master Model Railroader.--John Coy, MMR #730]